



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

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POLICY, SOCIOLOGY  
AND CRIMINOLOGY

## WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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## **Section 1: INTRODUCTION**

1. The Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement was set up on 29 June 2017 with the intention of exploring citizenship and civic engagement in the twenty-first century. This written submission is a response to its Call for Evidence to try and better understand the nature of the citizenship challenge for different parts of society while also thinking about citizenship and civic engagement in a more vibrant, positive and integrated manner.
2. In line with the Call for Evidence, this written submission uses the questions set out as a framework to offer views. These views are drawn from my research and scholarly engagement over the past 17 years in an attempt to provide timely, meaningful and informed insights. Where appropriate, footnotes are used to highlight appropriate sources.

## **Section 2: BRITISH IDENTITY AND NATIONHOOD**

3. Sociologists such as Durkheim have shown us that national identities and notions of nationhood are created through the establishment of ‘social facts’<sup>1</sup>. Constituting a wide range of different entities to which specific communities, societies or states express emotional attachment, ‘social facts’ function by unifying notions of familiarity, nostalgia and security. In doing so, they become unquestioned and symbolise what is normal and normative. In other words, they represent and symbolise who ‘we’ are.
4. As regards Britishness, a distinctly British identity was only conceived in the late 18th century and was indeterminably linked to what made Britain ‘Great’ at the time namely Empire, Protestantism, warfare and industry<sup>2</sup>. Symbolic of Britain’s global dominance at the time, notions of strength and power became normatively linked to notions of Britain and Britishness.
5. Prime Ministers, politicians and others in the public eye continue to routinely deploy such notions today thereby conferring such nostalgic understandings with popular legitimacy. Of course, continuing to identify Britain and Britishness in this way is extremely problematic not least because they appear irrelevant and distant to many in today’s British society<sup>3</sup>.

## **Section 3: VALUES & SHARED VALUES<sup>4</sup>**

6. The term ‘value’ has various meanings. When considering ‘shared’ values, it is likely to mean something attributed with importance, worth or usefulness that is also likely to be a standard or principle of behaviour therefore deemed important in life and something to

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<sup>1</sup> Durkheim, E. (2013) *Durkheim: the Rules of Sociological Method: And Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*. 2nd edn. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> Colley, L. (1992) ‘Britishness and Otherness: an Argument’, *Journal of British Studies*, 31(4), pp. 309–329.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, C. (2007) “Down With Multiculturalism, Book-burning and Fatwas”, *Culture and Religion*, 8(2), pp. 125–138. doi: 10.1080/14755610701423992.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller explanation see: Allen, C. & Isakjee, I. (2017) *In Pursuit of shared values in Birmingham: worthy endeavour or waste of time?* University of Birmingham: Birmingham.

share with others. In this respect, values should not be routinely dismissed out of hand. However, all of us are different and we attribute different levels of importance, worth or usefulness to a whole range of different things hence the focus on ‘shared values’ and the need to identify that which we all or at least many of us might attribute with importance or worth.

7. Much has been made of ‘shared values’ in recent years as a consequence of cohesion and integration taking a more central position in policy and political discourses; a response to Britain’s increasingly diverse population and ongoing immigration. Perceived anxieties about increasingly separate lives and the spectre of terrorism have also been significant. Central to these discourses has been the need to improve understanding about different people and different communities at the same time as respecting their differences. In essence, cohesion policy has sought to develop a shared sense of belonging and purpose.
8. In recent years, the drive towards identifying shared values has been prominent in debates about ‘British values’. However as a quick reflection of recent Prime Minister’s understandings of what Britain and Britishness might be shows to illustrate, trying to set out what being British is and what British values might mean is extremely difficult.
9. For Margaret Thatcher, Britishness was about: individual responsibility and industry: the Protestant work ethic; the upholding of democracy; the promotion and spread of liberty; and the importance of the family as also Parliament, Church and Monarchy also. Thatcher’s Britishness was then without doubt patriotic.
10. John Major’s Britain was characterised by cultural imagery: of warm beer and cricket on the village green, of going ‘back to basics’ and the instilling of traditional values.
11. For Tony Blair, while rooted in social justice there was also the need to rebrand Britishness via ‘Cool Britannia’. Critics might argue that Blair’s Britishness also saw itself as an unquestionable ally of America’s interventionist foreign policies.
12. More recently, David Cameron combined Thatcher’s patriotism with Major’s cultural imagery when he said that British values were “a belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility, respecting and upholding the rule of law – are the things we should try to live by every day. To me they’re as British as the Union Flag, as football, as fish and chips”<sup>5</sup>.
13. From Prime Ministers alone, it is apparent that British values typically fall into two categories: civic or cultural. In the former, you have Blair’s social justice while in the latter, Major’s warm beer and village green. Both however are problematic.
14. When trying to establish what Britishness is or more precisely what British values are, civic values rarely hold sway. Civic values relating to social justice, equality, fairness, democracy or freedom of speech for example are neither unique nor specifically British: there are few nation states which would not subscribe to them. So whilst British values may well be about

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<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister’s Office (2014) British values: David Cameron. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-values-article-by-david-cameron> (Accessed: 17 September 2015).

all of these things, so too would the values of Canada, Germany, Sweden and various others. Consequently, civic values can rarely be argued as being the preserve of any one nation.

15. As regards cultural values, very few are homogenously applicable. Typically dependent upon the socio-cultural and socio-economic heritages of different individuals and communities, cultural values are as subjective as they are exclusive. So for example, while warm beer and village greens may be attributed with importance and worth by somebody living in a Cotswolds village, the same would be highly unlikely by somebody living on a Moss Side council estate in Manchester. In many ways, cultural values are therefore quite banal and meaningless.
16. Factor in differences in age, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, education and a whole host of other variables and the identification of even a handful of universally accepted values become increasingly difficult. And as British society becomes increasingly diverse, so the identification of a single set of values that have universal importance and worth – and are unique to Britain and its people – becomes a near impossible endeavour.
17. This can be illustrated by considering shared values at a local level. So if ‘tolerance, fairness and courtesy’ were seen to be shared ‘Brummie’ civic values, then what exactly it is that would make these unique to Birmingham and Brummies? Why would those exact same values not also apply to Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham and elsewhere? If those same shared Brummie values were cultural then it might be argued that these would mean Brummies attribute worth to Cadburys chocolate, Rover cars and heavy metal music for instance. If so, then what happens to those Brummies who dislike Cadbury’s chocolate, choose not to drive a Rover or despise heavy metal? Are they then lesser Brummies because they do not share ‘our’ values; might their rejection of ‘our values’ be used to demarcate ‘us’ from ‘them’?
18. What about those also who only come to Birmingham for work or leisure? Do they have to share Brummie values while they are in the city or can they choose to continue to uphold their own values characterised by where they are from? And finally, what about those for whom Birmingham might be where they live but may never be ‘home’? Are they to rid themselves of their cultural, national, ethnic and other affiliations and allegiances, of their emotional, spiritual and physical attachments in order to truly share in Brummie values? Consequently, establishing a set of shared values is extremely difficult and inherently complex.

#### **Section 4: FUNDAMENTAL BRITISH VALUES**

19. In 2014, Operation Trojan Horse laid claim to a series of allegations about a plot by Islamist extremists to take-over a number of Birmingham schools<sup>6</sup>. Derived from an anonymous letter first published in the Sunday Telegraph, it was quickly described as likely to be a hoax

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<sup>6</sup> Allen, C. (2014b) Operation Trojan Horse: how a hoax problematised Muslims and Islam. Available at: <http://discoversociety.org/2014/07/01/operation-trojan-horse-how-a-hoax-problematised-muslims-and-islam/> (Accessed: 17 September 2015).

by Chris Sims, Chief Constable of West Midlands Police<sup>7</sup>. From the four investigations that ensued – the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted, Birmingham City Council and West Midlands Police – while a handful of issues relating to governance were identified<sup>8</sup> there was no evidence of a plot to takeover any schools and no evidence of extremism. All charges against five schoolteachers have been subsequently dropped prompting Baroness Sayeeda Warsi to recently call for an independent inquiry into the allegations<sup>9</sup>.

20. Shortly after the Trojan Horse allegations became public, the DfE published guidance about the need to promote ‘fundamental British values’ as a means of ensuring young people are prepared for life in modern Britain once they leave school. According to Ofsted, these fundamental British values are: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith. Since November 2014, schools have been required to actively promote them.
21. The active promotion of fundamental British values therefore has – and indeed continues to be – framed within discourses about counter-extremism and the legacy of Trojan Horse. Resultantly, it has become very easy for Muslims to interpret fundamental British values as directly targeting them on the basis that the Government does not see them as being ‘British’ and also most likely to become ‘extremists’. At the same time, it has become very easy for non-Muslims to interpret fundamental British values as being necessary because Muslims need to be ‘more British’ and are a ‘problem’ that needs ‘solving’<sup>10</sup>. To this extent, similar was voiced by Prime Minister Cameron in a speech to mark the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta; reported in the British press as ‘Be more British Cameron tells UK Muslims’ (Walters, 2014).
22. Despite being hollow, such statements are concerning as they appeal to common-sense: if Muslims are different and separate, then requiring them to be more like ‘us’ cannot be problematic. As such, it becomes common-sense to believe that Muslims are different and separate to the extent that their difference informs and duly becomes all that ‘they’ are seen to be. When political discourses – especially those from Prime Ministers - infer such, then fundamental British values appear as being far from impractical, unreasonable or extreme.
23. While so, they are concerning in that they deploy hollow and meaningless notions of identity that in turn confer legitimacy on the process of demarcating ‘them’ (Muslims) from ‘us’ (the British). In doing so, they construct an ‘Other’ through accentuating how different ‘they’ are from ‘us’, a process that would appear to be at complete odds with what they seek to achieve.

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<sup>7</sup> Pidd, H. and Dodd, V. (2014) Police chief condemns appointment of terror officer over ‘Islamic schools plot’. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/apr/15/police-chief-counter-terror-officer-islamic-schools-plot-birmingham> (Accessed: 22 September 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Howse, P. (2015) Overlapping ‘Trojan Horse’ inquiries criticised by MPs. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-31905704> (Accessed: 22 September 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Middle Eastern Eye (2017) Baroness Warsi calls for ‘Trojan Horse’ probe. Available at: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/warsi-calls-investigation-trojan-horse-following-oborne-column-778228530> (Accessed: 2 September 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Allen, C. (2015). Britishness and Muslim-ness: differentiation, demarcation and discrimination in political discourse. *Identity papers: A journal of British and Irish studies*, 1(2), 1-12.

## Section 5: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

33. There are some alternative approaches to bringing people together. One is to consider what it is that people value about the place they live in. Rather than trying to establish a set of British or Brummie values, processes are instead put in place that seek to better understand what it is that is unique, important and valued about living in Britain or Birmingham. Not only does this provide an opportunity to engage people irrespective of difference, so too does it provide an opportunity to understand what is unique about the country to the myriad of people who participate in British society in a myriad number of ways.
34. The opening question for this not only acknowledges the heterogeneity – the complexity and diversity - of today's Britain but so too does it provide opportunities for the homogeneity of Britain's diverse population to come through equally. As such, all are able to share what they value.
35. Another approach is to explore the value of experience. In doing so, what is explored is that which brings people together and what experiences they share. This is pertinent because many people feel that their city or where they live is important to their sense of belonging and home. While so, everyday experiences can – at times - be somewhat mundane. While so, they remain undeniably meaningful to individuals and communities. Exploring the everyday lives of British people therefore provides an opportunity to construct a better picture and understanding of how our diverse histories and journeys intersect. From here, it is possible to find narratives that form the basis for a greater sense of togetherness.
36. Another alternative is for Britain's diversity to be seen, utilised and duly spoken about as being an asset. An excellent example of this is illustrated in both the bid to win and subsequent host the London 2012 Olympic Games. During the presentation by Britain's Bid Committee in 2005 in trying to secure the right to host the Games in 2012, Britain's – and more specifically London's – diversity was seen to be of value. Committee members spoke about how 'our' diversity offered significant opportunity and that it was a living success. This message was reinforced in an accompanying multi-story film titled, *The World in One City*. After its screening the then Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone added that "London is a city that welcomes the world with open arms...a city where 300 languages are spoken every day and the people who speak them, live together happily...". This was followed by Lord Sebastian Coe who said London was a "multicultural mix of 200 nations...[where] families have come from every continent. They practice every religion and every faith. What unites them is London". As he put it, it was the place and the experience of sharing London that made it – and Britain – special and unique.
37. The same was true of the opening ceremony in 2012 when British identity was not only multicultural and diverse but more importantly, valuing of it. Directed by Oscar winning film director Danny Boyle, the ceremony began with a short film of the River Thames tracing its way through Britain to London. From there, various large-scale tableaux drew in various junctures of British social, cultural and political history including the Industrial Revolution, the two World Wars, the swinging sixties, the monarchy and James Bond among others. While the monarchy and Bond nodded towards notions of empire and privilege, these were counter-balanced by nods towards Britain's more progressive politics, evident in references

to suffrage, and trade unions. The ceremony also incorporated the arrival of the first Commonwealth migrants on the Empire Windrush and gave recognition to black and ethnic minority Britons via their role within the National Health Service and among others, through the projection of Britain's first televised interracial kiss onto the side of the house during the 'social media' interlude, a piece that also focused on the lives of two visibly non-white actors.

38. Successfully merging the old with the new, one of the most striking features of the ceremony was how Boyle deployed black and minority ethnic performers. In being ever prominent, they were used in ways that rendered many of Britain's pre-mass migration historical junctures inaccurate. Yet at no time was Britain's history threatened, criticised or seen to be having unfair demands placed on it. Because of this, the ceremony conveyed a very traditional vision and notion of Britain and Britishness at the same time as conveying one that seemed to truly understand and reflect who and what Britain and Britishness is today. As Tim Soutphommasane in *The Guardian* put it, "Danny Boyle's opening ceremony did the most to define the legacy of the Games...It was a convincing argument that Britishness wasn't about nostalgic yearning for the stuff of an imperial past, but something that existed in the present and future"<sup>11</sup>.

39. What the 2012 London Games highlighted was that Britain's diversity was a fact.

40. Paradoxically however, while Britain was self-aggrandising to a global audience about how successful its world in one city approach had been, about how Britain's tolerance, equality and sense of fairness was something from which the entire world could learn, subsequent British governments, various politicians and others in the public eye had also been repeatedly using those very same things to tell the British people the complete opposite, oft recounting just how unsuccessful - and failing - Britain's diversity not only has been but so too continues to be<sup>12</sup>.

## **Section 6: CONCLUSION**

41. Establishing a coherent and unique set of shared British values is extremely complex and fraught with difficulties. Civic values are rarely ever distinctive and unique to any given nation while cultural values rarely tend to be meaningful to everyone in society.

42. Notions of British identity and British nationhood are rooted in a relatively short but extremely distinct historical period. Consequently, British identity and nationhood is typically associated with power and strength and thereby Empire, war and what made Britain historically 'Great'. Continuing with the same notions today fails to take into account Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century whether in terms of its diverse population or its place in the world.

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<sup>11</sup> Tim Soutphommasane. "Labour can Make the Most of a Britain Alive with Olympic Spirit." *Guardian*, 19 August 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, C. (2014). A critical analysis of Britain's living, dead and Zombie multiculturalism: from 7/7 to the London 2012 Olympic Games. *Social Sciences*, 4(1), 18-33.

43. Fundamental British values are problematic in that they comprise civic values they fail to incorporate exactly what it means to be British. They are also problematic on the basis that they are framed in counter-extremism policies and discourses.
44. Political and other voices in the public space have used British identity, nationhood and British values in ways that have conferred legitimacy on demarcating ‘them’ from ‘us’. In this way, fundamental British values can be argued as being counter-productive.
45. When exploring what brings us together, it is necessary to reach out to Britain’s heterogeneity. Whether in terms of place or experience, a better picture and understanding of how our diverse journeys and histories intersect is long overdue. However, from these it is possible that narratives will the potential to form the basis for a greater sense of togetherness will begin to emerge.
46. Communicating Britain’s diversity as being a valuable asset has been shown to be effective and successful. A greater emphasis on our diversity as being successful and valuable in the public and political spaces has the very real potential of not only changing attitudes – and what is seen to be common-sense about our diversity and differences – but so bringing more people together.
47. Those in the public and political spaces must be challenged when they use Britain’s diversity as a means to create tensions and divisions. In a post-Brexit context, this is especially important.
48. As the London 2012 Games opening ceremony showed, it is possible for a very traditional vision and notion of Britain and Britishness to be conveyed that simultaneously recognises and incorporates a very real understanding of who and what Britain and Britishness is today. More of this is necessary if we are to truly feel as though we all belong.

## **DISCLAIMER**

This written submission contains the views of the individual author. Responsibility for any errors therefore lies solely with the author(s):

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